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TAGS: [GM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: GERMANY'S LEFT PARTY: NOT READY FOR PRIME TIME --
BUT GETTING ESTABLISHED

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Classified By: MINISTER COUNSELOR FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS GEORGE GLASS FO
R REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

SUMMARY

[1](#). (C) The Left Party's electoral campaign caught some wind in the final weeks before the September 27 national elections with its electoral successes in Saarland and Thuringia (see REFTELS B and C). This small surge, however, has not turned into meaningful gains in the polls despite its populist campaign. It is doubtful that the party will manage to pull more than 10-11% of the vote in Sunday's election. That said, The Left Party has never harbored any hopes of entering government this time around. Indeed, the Social Democratic Party's (SPD) opposition to forming a coalition with the Left Party at this time is clear. In addition, the Left Party's Berlin Chairman Klaus Lederer told PolOff that his party "could not even contemplate power in 2009 since it needed more time in opposition to gain legislative and political experience." This will be The Left Party's principal objective from 2009 onwards.

[2](#). (C) However, the party may not have to wait for an opportunity until the next elections in 2013. In the event of a coalition between the Christian Democratic Union (CDU)/Christian Social Union (CSU) and the SPD after the election (Grand Coalition), some experts predict that the SPD will pull out of this coalition some time during the legislative term to then form a coalition with the Left Party and the Greens, a so-called red-red-green coalition. If a Grand Coalition is in the cards on Sunday night, pundits will likely speculate on how long such a coalition will last and whether a red-red-green government is as close as one or two years away. End summary.

OSKAR LAFONTAINE - THE MYSTERIOUS RED SPHINX

[3](#). (C) Left Party Chairman Lafontaine can take much of the credit for reinvigorating The Left Party and helping it shed its image in the west as a party dominated by communists and socialists from the former east. But he remains the mysterious red sphinx of German politics. Lafontaine has been shunned by many of his former comrades in the SPD after he split from the SPD and ran as leader of the new The Left Party in the 2005 elections. He is loved -- and, in some case, hated -- by his Left Party comrades. Lafontaine can claim to be the most polarizing figure in German politics. He cultivates his image with great care by micro-managing every public performance he undertakes.

[4](#). (C) His leadership -- criticized by some party members as

"dictatorial" throughout the election campaign -- has proven essential in directing the party's activities and programs, especially during an election year. He maintains total control of The Left Party by shaping its political and economic messages and stifling potential dissent quickly. His recent success as The Left Party's candidate in Saarland was hailed by Left Party contacts as a watershed event in the party's attempt to gain more political recognition in the west. In Saarland, The Left Party continues to enjoy a fighting chance of entering a governing coalition with the SPD and the Greens (NOTE: the Greens are awaiting the outcome of the national parliamentary elections before committing themselves to a red-red-Green coalition. END NOTE).

15. (C) While Lafontaine's future professional ambitions may be shrouded in mystery, his mere presence at the party's helm continues to ensure The Left Party's political relevance. His retirement from politics would spell disaster for The Left Party but there is no reason to believe that Lafontaine will be leaving German politics anytime soon. In 2013, he will turn 69 - plenty of time for Lafontaine to lead his party in opposition and prepare for political power with the SPD.

ELECTION STRATEGIES: ATTRACTING THE DISGRUNTLED

16. (C) The Left Party -- drawing strength from electoral success in Saarland and Thuringia (see REFTELS B and C) -- mounted an effective parliamentary election campaign, which was never designed to catapult the party into political power. Simple campaign messages like: "Out of Afghanistan,"

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"Wealth for all," "No to retirement at 67," all caught the public's attention. Rather than aiming to take power, the party hopes to achieve a respectable result on September 27, with the intention of using it as a foundation for attracting more voters in the run-up to the 2013 elections. The Left Party's campaign was successful in attracting disgruntled SPD voters who no longer trust their party's "social democratic" credentials and who are frustrated by their party's weakened state. By focusing on Germany's economic plight, rising unemployment figures, and what The Left Party has argued are the social inequalities caused by the SPD's Agenda 2010 welfare reforms, The Left Party was able to steal the SPD's political thunder.

"NO" TO AFGHANISTAN AND ARMS EXPORTS

17. (C) At a Left Party campaign rally with Gregor Gysi (Oskar Lafontaine's political comrade in arms), Gysi kicked off his presentation with The Left Party's anti-war message on Afghanistan. The September 10 Hamburg rally was attended by PolOff and took place under the watchful eye of a large number of agitators from the right-wing extremist National Democratic Party (NPD). The Left Party has been successful in turning the German public's opposition towards the Bundeswehr's participation in ISAF into electoral points. Two-thirds of the German electorate oppose the "war" in Afghanistan. This segment in German society will not automatically support The Left Party, but some will. In the current political landscape where all other major parties support Germany's engagement in Afghanistan, it makes sense for the party to continue to tap into German discontent on this issue.

18. (C) In addition, Gysi attracted great applause by chiding the government for its pro-active arms exports policy, which have catapulted the country to third place (behind Russia and the United States, but before China) in the arms exports tables. He cited a 70 percent increase in German arms exports and said that "Germany should be ashamed of itself, given its history in this area."

¶9. (C) The SPD under Steinmeier and Chairman Franz Muntefering have made it clear that the SPD will not form a coalition that includes The Left Party on the national level after the 2009 elections -- even if the numbers would allow them. Most commentators take Steinmeier and Muntefering at their word. The question that has arisen, however, is whether the SPD, pushed by its younger, more left-leaning, leaders (such as Berlin Mayor Wowereit, Environment Minister Gabriel, and Bundestag member Nahles) would break up the Grand Coalition in one or two years and then form a majority coalition with The Left Party and the Greens. Merkel and other political leaders in the CSU and FDP have raised this specter as a warning to voters who have qualms about The Left Party not to vote for the SPD. Indeed, serving in a Grand Coalition for four years would not serve either the SPD or the CDU, as it would weaken both their profiles and alienate elements of their constituencies, sending more disgruntled SPDers to The Left Party and more CDUers to the FDP. The SPD may find it harder and harder to resist exiting such a coalition as The Left Party continues to benefit from the SPD's inability to define coherent political messages that would resonate strongly with a left-of-center audience.

FUTURE POWER FOR SPD-LEFT?

¶10. (C) There may be no SPD coalition with the Left Party on a national level in 2009. But a SPD-Left Party coalition in 2013 or even earlier -- if the Grand Coalition comes into fruition but falls apart -- should not be dismissed. The more state-level coalitions exist between the SPD and The Left Party, the likelier it is that both parties will form a red-red coalition with the Greens on a national level. Indeed, Professor Oskar Niedermayer of Berlin's Free University, a reputed political analyst, told PolOffs that one practical prerequisite for the SPD to form a coalition with The Left Party on the national level, would be to govern with that party in a western state. The SPD already governs with The Left Party in Berlin, but this is considered part of the east. However, Saarland is close to becoming that first western state. Niedermayer reasoned that forming a coalition with The Left in a western state, would make such a coalition more acceptable, more palatable, on the national level.

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¶11. (C) However, in contemplating an SPD-Left Party coalition, Lafontaine's persona remains problematic for rank-and-file SPD members who remember with disdain when Lafontaine left the SPD-Green government ten years ago. Lafontaine's political legacy is currently hanging in the balance, but he can claim responsibility for having moved the SPD to the left of the political spectrum at a time when the party needed to move more to the center to enjoy political success. There may be a current aversion to Oskar Lafontaine's persona among the older SPD guard, but future and younger SPD leaders may have fewer reservations about joining a coalition with The Left Party with Lafontaine at the helm. The Left Party may have been formed by Socialist Unity Party apparatchiks loyal to the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) and west German Communists, Marxists, Socialists, and Trotskyites, but the party has worked hard -- with some success -- to shed its radical image among skeptical voters who do not necessarily long for a return to the days of the GDR, but who seek to fill a political vacuum on the left created by the SPD.

Murphy